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SUBJECT: BELARUS AND THE ELECTIONS ACCORDING TO 2001
CANDIDATE GONCHARIK

REF: MINSK 1528

Classified By: Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador recently met with former trade union leader and 2001 opposition presidential candidate Vladimir Goncharik to discuss the current political and economic environment in Belarus. Goncharik noted Belarus, worsening political and economic situation and Belarusians, growing dissatisfaction with their country's leadership. The former opposition leader believes President Lukashenko will win the elections in part because the opposition has failed to convince the public that life would be better under a new leader. The opposition needed to focus its time on garnering support rather than attending conferences and seminars. Following the elections, Goncharik predicted that Belarus, economy will worsen and the GOB would take further measures to increase its control over the people. End Summary.

¶2. On February 6, former leader of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) and opposition contender in the 2001 presidential elections Vladimir Goncharik called on Ambassador. Goncharik was chosen as the democratic forces, opposition presidential candidate one month before the elections. Semyon Domash backed out of the race and threw his support behind Goncharik. According to the official voting tally in 2001, Lukashenko won 75.65 percent of the vote, pro-Lukashenko MP Sergey Gaidukevich 2.48 percent, and Goncharik 15.65 percent. Independent international and domestic observers concluded the 2001 presidential elections did not meet international standards.

The Situation Worsens

¶3. (C) On February 6, Goncharik told Ambassador that he had dj vu when looking at Belarus, current political situation, likening it to the political scene before the 2001 elections, but only worse. Goncharik was pessimistic towards Belarus, immediate future, noting that the economic, political, and social situation in Belarus had deteriorated in the last five years. Wages increased as the President promised, but so did the price of goods. According to production levels, Belarus, economy grew, but only because of cheap Russian fuel and not from sales. According to Goncharik, President Lukashenko's critical mistake was not transforming the economy into a free market system when he first took power. He thought that Lukashenko's increasing

control over the economy had created a situation that would make it more difficult to introduce free market principles today than it would have been in 2001. Goncharik stated that the GOB needed to encourage investment and offer incentives to business rather than trying to control them. Fear has gripped society, and GOB policies, such as the newly introduced contract system, work well to control the people.

¶4. (C) According to Goncharik, Belarusians, dissatisfaction with the country,s situation is greater because more of the populace is now facing problems that did not affect them in ¶2001. Not one company manager or director with whom Goncharik has met was satisfied with the current system. Goncharik believes that Lukashenko is aware of the growing dissatisfaction, but fortunately for him, the population is focused more on the possible negative consequences of democratic change, such as a significant increase in unemployment and pension loss, rather than the benefits.

Milinkevich and Kozulin Do Not Have a Chance in Lukashenko,s Election System

¶5. (C) Goncharik doubted presidential contenders Aleksandr Milinkevich and Aleksandr Kozulin would win a significant number of votes in the upcoming presidential elections. The GOB already &predicted8 that Lukashenko would receive 70-75 percent of the vote and the opposition candidates would not receive a high enough percentage to legitimately protest. According to Goncharik, Lukashenko,s support ratings are closer to 45-55 percent and Milinkevich,s are 20-30 percent. If Milinkevich could increase his ratings to 35-40 percent, Goncharik believes the presidential contender would have the support needed to mount an effective protest.

¶6. (C) Goncharik doubted Kozulin would vigorously pursue the presidency to the very end because he had too much to lose. Kozulin is relatively young with little affiliation to a political party, many good contacts in the nomenclature, and in general could still have a bright future in Lukashenko,s Belarus. Goncharik predicted that if Kozulin continued with the race, he would lose these opportunities, ending up like Milinkevich and (as he admitted) Goncharik.

Is Kozulin a GOB Pawn?

¶7. (C) Ambassador noted the irony of why an opposition activist like Mikhail Marinich was sitting in jail for a speculative crime while Kozulin, who was accused of corruption while being rector of Belarusian State University, remained free as a presidential contender. Goncharik dismissed rumors that Kozulin was not in jail because he was a GOB stooge. Goncharik pointed out that opposition activists Marinich and Sergey Skrebets did not go to jail immediately for their anti-Lukashenko activities. He predicted that if Kozulin became a bigger threat to Lukashenko, he would be sent to jail like the others.

Support for Opposition Parties Remains Low

¶8. (C) Aside from GOB measures to marginalize and taint the opposition, Goncharik posited that the oppositional political parties have been unable to develop a coherent, attractive, and relevant message to voters. Without this, the opposition would not get the popular support it needed to secure political reform in Belarus. Goncharik argued that the opposition must change its strategy to stave off decreasing party membership and party members, lack of faith in their leaders. Goncharik said another problem was that the opposition leadership wasted its energy on technical details, such as conferences and seminars, rather than meeting with constituents and garnering support. Goncharik noted that in the last five years, not one charismatic or colorful leader has emerged from the opposition. The opposition needs to capitalize on the populace,s dissatisfaction with the status

quo by convincing people that life would be better under new leadership.

Two Paths After the Elections

¶9. (C) Goncharik predicted that Belarus would experience economic problems following the elections because all GOB resources were being used to maintain Lukashenko,s popular social programs and these resources will soon be depleted. (Comment: Most political and economical analysts believe that the Belarusian economy will decline due to other factors, such as a sharp increase in prices for Russian gas in 2007 and the loss of competitiveness of Belarusian goods in the Russian market (reftel).) Goncharik was not sure what Lukashenko would do after the elections. He could decide to increase his control over society, further cracking down on opposition elements, or could loosen up his grip and reintroduce a few democratic practices, such as reopening independent newspapers and arranging for opposition MPs to return to Parliament. Goncharik believed the second variant would make Lukashenko appear as less of a dictator and could, ironically, hurt the opposition,s fight.

Comment

¶10. (C) Goncharik,s assessment of the dissatisfaction and fear among the citizens is what we often hear from many political and society leaders. Perhaps his negative assessment of the opposition,s tactics is due to his own failure as a presidential candidate in 2001 and the opposition,s treatment of him as a virtual non-person, but we have heard similar views from other observers of the opposition political scene.
Krol